

Message Text

SECRET

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ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 /026 W
-----106377 251200Z /53
O 251106Z AUG 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9379
INFO AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY
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AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 04957

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, MOPS, SY, LE
SUBJECT: LEBANON'S SYRIAN PRESENCE

REF: STATE 215078

1. SUMMARY: SYRIANS UNLIKELY TO BE RECEPTIVE TO ANY US INITIATIVE PRESENTED DIRECTLY AT THIS TIME. THEY SUSPECT ISRAELIS OF WANTING TO INCITE MORE VIOLENCE IN LEBANON TO DRAW ATTENTION AWAY FROM EXPECTED ISRAELI "INTRANSIGENCE." RELIABLE DATT SOURCE REPORTS SYRIANS PLANNING TROOP INCREASE. EVEN THOUGH KHADDAM WOULD PROBABLY TURN US DOWN FLAT, I AM PREPARED TO MAKE THE APPROACH TO PLANT THE SEED FOR THE FUTURE AND TO TRY TO DISABUSE HIM OF THE MYTH THAT USG IS SUPPORTING MARONITES BEHIND SYRIA'S BACK. END SUMMARY.

2. WE WILL HAVE ROUGH SLEDDING TRYING TO GET THE SYRIANS TO MAKE ANY ANNOUNCEMENT OF WITHDRAWAL EVEN FROM SECURE AREAS OF LEBANON PRIOR TO THE CAMP DAVID SUMMIT IN VIEW CURRENT TENSE SITUATION. REGRETTABLY THE SYRIANS INTERPRET ISRAELI EDITORIAL COMMENT, REPORTED CLANDESTINE MEETING
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THREE NIGHTS AGO BETWEEN BEGIN AND CHAMOUN, SHELLING OF PORT AREA, MOVEMENT OF PHALANGE TROOPS INTO POSITIONS VACATED BY SYRIAN FORCES, ETC. AS AN INDICATION THAT ISRAEL MAY INCITE VIOLENCE IN LEBANON TO DISTRACT WORLD'S FOCUS FROM BEGIN'S INTRANSIGENT POSITION AT CAMP DAVID. IN FACT, DATT IS REPORTING SEPARATELY FROM VERY RELIABLE SOURCE THAT, ACCORDING TO KHADDAM, SYRIANS ARE PLANNING TO IN

CREASE THEIR FORCE LEVEL TO 40,000.

3. REFLECTING THE SYRIAN CONCERN WERE ARTICLES IN THE CONTROLLED SYRIAN PRESS ON AUGUST 22 AND 23. THESE ARTICLES RAISED THE POSSIBILITY THAT ISRAEL MIGHT STIMULATE VIOLENCE IN LEBANON TO ESCAPE FROM US AND WORLD CENSURE OVER ITS ATTITUDE AT CAMP DAVID. PRESS DOES NOT EXCLUDE THE POSSIBILITY THAT FIGHTING IN BEIRUT, WHETHER OR NOT THE ISRAELIS TRIGGER IT, MIGHT LEAD TO ISRAELI INTERVENTION AND A BROADER WAR. IN THIS ATMOSPHERE, WITH MUTUAL SUSPICION BETWEEN SYRIA AND ISRAEL OF EACH OTHER'S INTENTIONS DURING THE PERIOD BEFORE CAMP DAVID, SYRIAN LEADERSHIP WILL NOT BE RECEPTIVE TO THE IDEA OF REDUCING STRENGTH IN LEBANON.

4. I FULLY RECOGNIZE ADVANTAGES OF MODEST SYRIAN WITHDRAWAL IN OUR EFFORTS: A) TO URGE MORE STRONGLY ISRAELI AND MARONITE RESTRAINT; B) TO CALM RIGHTIST ELEMENTS IN LEBANESE AMERICAN COMMUNITY; AND C) TO IMPROVE THE ATMOSPHERE ON THE HILL RE SOUGHT-AFTER RESTORATION OF SYRIAN AID PROGRAM. THESE ARE ALL KEY OBJECTIVES WHICH CLEARLY SERVE SYRIA'S LONG-TERM INTERESTS. BUT I AM AFRAID THAT OBJECTIVE CONDITIONS ON THE GROUND IN BEIRUT JUST AREN'T GOING TO ENABLE SYRIANS TO AGREE TO ANY SUCH WITHDRAWAL. CEASE-FIRE IN EAST BEIRUT IS SHAKY AT BEST DESPITE REPORTS THAT NEITHER ISRAEL NOR SYRIA WILL MAKE A MOVE UNTIL AT SECRET

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LEAST AFTER CAMP DAVID. TROUBLE IS THAT UNMANAGEABLE GANGS COULD STILL PROVOKE A RENEWAL OF FIGHTING WHICH COULD ESCALATE, AND SYRIANS KNOW THIS.

5. I CONTINUE TO FAVOR PROPOSING A SYRIAN TROOP REDUCTION ONCE REPEAT ONCE TENSIONS ARE REDUCED SIGNIFICANTLY AND A SUCCESSFUL DISENGAGEMENT OF THE CENTER OF BEIRUT HAS OCCURRED (DAMASCUS 4843). AND I THINK THAT UNDER THESE CIRCUMSTANCES WE MIGHT POSSIBLY GET SYRIANS TO GO ALONG, PARTICULARLY IF SARKIS AGREES. BUT THESE CONDITIONS DO NOT NOW PREVAIL AND I CAN PREDICT WITH ALMOST COMPLETE CERTAINTY THAT IF WE APPROACH SYRIANS NOW ON THIS MATTER THEY WILL TURN US DOWN FLAT. FOR ONE THING THEY WOULD BE CERTAIN THAT A WITHDRAWAL OF SOME OF THEIR TROOPS FROM LEBANON AT THIS POINT WOULD ONLY EMBOLDEN THE MARONITE MILITIA--EVEN THOUGH WE WOULD PRESUMABLY TELL THEM THAT WE WOULD SEEK SOME KIND OF PARALLEL "WITHDRAWAL" ACTION BY THE MARONITE MILITIA.

6. HAVING SAID THE FOREGOING, I DON'T MIND TAKING A CRACK AT THIS IF THE DEPARTMENT WANTS ME TO. I WOULD SEEK OUT KHADDAM AND DO MY BEST TO CONVINCE HIM OF THE IMPORTANCE

OF RESTORING IN THIS MANNER INTERNATIONAL CONFIDENCE IN SYRIA'S INTENTIONS RE LEBANON. I WOULD WANT TO BE ABLE TO ASSURE HIM THAT AT SAME TIME WE WERE WEIGHING IN AWFULLY HARD WITH THE PHALANGE, AHRAR, AND ISRAELIS. HE IS NOT LIKELY TO HAVE MUCH CONFIDENCE IN THESE ASSURANCES IN VIEW OF CONTINUED ISRAELI SUPPORT FOR ACTIVITIES OF MILITIA IN

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SOUTHERN LEBANON, PLUS CONTINUED SUPPLY OF ISRAELI ARMS TO MILITIA IN NORTH. BUT I CAN TRY.

7. I WOULD ALSO POINT OUT THAT ANY SYRIAN WITHDRAWAL WOULD NOT BE DESIGNED TO WEAKEN SYRIAN POSITION RE BEIRUT. IN ESSENCE, WITHDRAWAL WOULD BE TOKEN AND SYMBOLIC--AND, IN OUR VIEW, WOULD NOT ONLY SERVE SYRIA'S INTERESTS BUT HELP US TO MORE EFFECTIVELY SUPPORT SYRIAN POSITION IN LEBANON. KHADDAM WILL NO DOUBT SAY NO, BUT I WILL AT LEAST HAVE TRIED TO PLANT SEED OF SYRIAN SELF-INTEREST IN A SYMBOLIC WITHDRAWAL FOR SUBSEQUENT GERMINATION WHEN CONDITIONS ARE MORE FAVORABLE. I WILL ALSO HAVE TRIED TO DISABUSE HIM OF THE MYTH, WHICH HE MAY OR MAY NOT BELIEVE BUT WHICH HE IS STATING AS HIS VIEW IN TALKING WITH OTHERS, THAT WE ARE SUPPORTING MARONITE MILITIA BEHIND THE SYRIANS' BACKS.
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